

WASS course From Topic to Proposal: Getting started

October/November '23

Contact person

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Wageningen School
of Social Sciences

This course targets recently started PhD candidates in the Social/Environmental Sciences working on their research proposal. It contributes to the process of proposal writing during the start of the PhD project. It supports writing a proposal to convey your ideas coherently. Assignments require you to work on your own project proposal.

WASS course From Topic to Proposal: Getting started

Language	English
Credits	2
Period	October-November 2023
Time and venue	5 October, 13.15-17.15, room C70 (Leeuwenborch) 12 October, 08.45-12.30, room C68 (Leeuwenborch) 26 October, 13.00-17.15, room C77 (Leeuwenborch) 2 November, 09.00-13.00, room V72 (Leeuwenborch)
Assessment	The course will be completed upon active participation in the sessions and showing commitment via the assignments.
Contact person	Dr. ir. Jochem Jonkman; jochem.jonkman@wur.nl 0317-489549, Leeuwenborch 1046
Course coordinators	Jochem Jonkman & Fennie van Straalen (WASS)
Lecturer(s)	Marleen Buizer (COM) Peter Tamas (Biometris) Jaime Hogesteger (WRM) Jessica Duncan (RSO)
Secretariat	WASS secretary office; Marcella Haan; Marcella.Haan@wur.nl

Profile of the course

If you're fresh into the PhD, this course is there to help you getting started with writing your research proposal. In four interactive sessions we touch on different aspects relevant to formulating your research problem, translating it to research questions and thinking about your research approach. You will also meet with other participants in peer consultation sessions to jointly discuss and reflect on your progress and provide each other with feedback. One of the course coordinators can be present at these sessions as a coach, to provide support from their expertise as social scientist.

This course contributes to the process of proposal writing during the start of your PhD project. It supports writing a proposal to convey your ideas and convince others that these are interesting, coherent and that you have a logical point of view. Assignments require you to work on your own project proposal.

Topics in the course are:

- Research as a way of thinking
- Research as a process
- Formulating a research problem and objective
- Formulating research questions

Please be aware that the previous course *Research Methodology: From topic to proposal* has been redesigned and split into this course which helps you get started on proposal writing, and a course that goes more in-depth into [Research Methodology](#).

Assumed prerequisite knowledge

N/A

Learning outcomes

After successful completion of this course, participants are expected to be able to:

1. Position their research in relation to seminal and current articles from relevant scientific disciplines
2. Describe the societal relevance of their research
3. Formulate research questions and decide on the appropriateness of having hypotheses
4. Identify what type of research approach is suitable for the research
5. Delineate the scope and boundaries of your research project
6. Critically reflect on the coherence of argumentation and justification used in the research proposal

Literature (access through WUR Library):

Ranjit Kumar (2014). *Research methodology*(4th ed). London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage publications Ltd. ISBN 9781446269978. <https://wur.on.worldcat.org/oclc/863173091> (4th ed) or <https://wur.on.worldcat.org/oclc/1023528389> (5th ed)

Tobi & Kampen (2018). *Research design: the methodology for interdisciplinary research framework* [10.1007/s11135-017-0513-8](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-017-0513-8)

Other materials will be shared later.

Activities

The course will consist of four plenary sessions with lectures, information and discussion; peer groups (optionally with coach); and self-study.

Preparation for session 1:

- Prepare your research topic (single sentence) and add in three sentences (i) why it is of interest to you, (ii) how will you focus on the topic, and (iii) why should others care. We will use these statements during the introduction round in session 1.
- Cursory reading of Tobi & Kampen (2018) Research design: the methodology for interdisciplinary research framework
- Cursory reading of chapter 2: the research process: a quick glance, from the book of Kumar (2014)
- Literature assignment (shared separately)

Session 1: Situational Awareness

5 October, 13.15*-17.15, room C70 (Leeuwenborch building)

*due to the availability of the room we start at 13.15

- Introduction to the course and other participants
- *Putting your research topic in context* with Marleen Buizer
- *Deliberations on literature review* with Peter Tamas
- Introduction to the assignments and looking forward to the next session

Assignment 1

Read chapters 3 and 4 from the book of Kumar (reviewing literature and formulating a research problem). Identify and describe the contribution to the field that your research will focus on. Describe how available literature leads to identifying where you aim to contribute. Write a short summary on your problem definition and research objective (less than 1 A4). Please send this by email to jochem.jonkman@wur.nl before Wednesday 11 October (so by Tuesday 10 October).

Assignment 2

Interview your supervisor to gain insight in their experience being a scientist and their approach to starting up a scientific project. There is no fixed set of questions, below is a series of questions that could help you get the conversation started. You don't need to prepare a full report, but please share one or two insights or things that triggered you by email with jochem.jonkman@wur.nl before Wednesday 11 October.

What makes their research field of interest to them? How does it relate to who they are? Which parts of themselves/their identity do they bring with them to work and what do they leave at home? What aspects of their identity are important in their work? How does this help or influence their work? What strategies do they find useful to position their research in the field? What do they do to identify key publications when they're branching out, how do they deal with the sheer volume of 'stuff you don't know and haven't read' when they're developing a new project?

Session 2: From topic to research question

12 October, 8.45-12.30, room C68 (Leeuwenborch building)

"Bad research questions are a common cause of (at best) wasted time and (at worst) failed research, or (occasionally) of tragedy when a mistaken result is used for public policy-making" Petre & Rugg (2010, p.96)

- *Game play to elaborate upon your research problem* with Jessica Duncan
- Drafting the research question: Jaime Hoogesteger
- Explaining the assignment and looking forward to the next session

Assignment 3

- Read chapter 7 and 13 of Kumar, cursory reading of chapter 5 and 8
- Revisit Tobi & Kampen (2018) Research design: the methodology for interdisciplinary research framework
- Identify concepts relevant for your research. You will need these in the next session as input.

Session 3: Research approach

26 October, 13.00-17.15, room C77 (Leeuwenborch building)

- PhDs from y3 / 4 engage with course participants about conceptual/research frameworks
- Different types of conceptual frameworks and developing your own, based on the previously identified concepts
- Characterising and delineating your research, map out what is in your mind
- Explaining the assignment and looking forward to the next session

Assignment 4

- Prepare a short pitch to spark the interest of others in your research and motivate your approach to the study
- Rewrite your problem definition, research objectives and research questions (max 2 A4). Send this by e-mail to jochem.jonkman@wur.nl , latest on Monday, 30 October.

Session 4: why why why why (coherence / logical point of view on the subject matter / argumentation)

2 November, 9.00-13.00, room V72 (Leeuwenborch building)

- Pitch and peer feedback: before the session, read each other's work, during the meeting provide feedforward and critical reflection.
- Reflect if your text:
 - o Builds on / links to seminal work and current state of the literature: what's happening?
 - o Shows how you are approaching/interpreting the subject matter
 - o Prepares readers/reviewers on what to expect
 - o Leads to an answers of the main research question
 - o Makes clear which stakeholders are relevant and how they relate (integral part of research setup, end-users)
- Develop and discuss action plan to continue with your proposal
- Wrapping up: When enough is enough....

Peer group sessions:

For the course, we facilitate two peer group sessions for which the time and date has to be determined within the group according to the schedule below:

Peer group session 1	date and time to be agreed within group in week 41 (9-13 October)
Peer group session 2	date and time to be agreed within group in week 43 (23-27 October)

In the peer group sessions, you have the opportunity to discuss your challenges in progressing with the research proposal, to reflect upon each other's experiences in delineating the research topic. You can request the presence of one of the course coordinators, to benefit from their reflection on your interaction.

Assessment strategy

The course will be completed upon active participation in the sessions and showing commitment via the assignments. The assignments will be used as input for the next sessions and should simultaneously help you proceed with your proposal writing.